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Towards a Missiology of Caring for Creation

Peter Harris

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Over recent years far more attention has been given to the creation within an understanding of the redeeming purposes of God. It is fair to say that an effective consensus has been reached among evangelical theologians that God's redemption in Christ extends beyond the person, and beyond the human community, to the creation itself. Given the force of passages such as Romans 8:19-21,[1] the only surprise is that we should have taken so long to escape the unbiblical constraints that enlightenment humanism has imposed on a more authentically rounded gospel.

> [19]The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. [20]For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope [21]that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

Colossians 1:19, 20 makes it equally plain:

> [19]For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, [20]and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

A number of interesting accounts of the long-lived success of an anthropocentric rather than Christocentric perspective on salvation have been advanced. We could mention Mary Grey's analysis[2] in which she quotes Thomas Berry,[3] suggesting that 'a turn away from the earth' occurred during the Black Death in the middle of the fourteenth century. Between 1347 and 1349 around 33 per cent of the popula-

1 Biblical quotations are from NIV.

2 Mary Grey, *Earth-keeping: Pastoral Theology in a Climate of Globalisation,* Inaugural Lecture, University of Wales, Lampeter 2001.

3 Thomas Berry, *The Great Work* (Bell Tower, New York, 1999).

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tion of Europe died at a time in pre-scientific Europe when no one knew of bacteria or germs. So, Berry claims, 'They could only conclude that humans had become so depraved that God was punishing the world. The best thing to do was intensify devotion and seek redemption out of the world.'

In reaction to this other-worldly devotion Grey argues that the way was then paved for more strictly horizontal and human explanations of life. Richard Lovelace, the Princeton church historian, sees other causes at work.

> The formula that insists that the gospel should deal with 'spiritual matters' and not meddle with political or social affairs, the familiar Fundamentalist argument for passive support of the status quo, emerged before the Civil War as a conservative evangelical defence of resistance toward or postponement of abolition. The seriousness of the break in evangelical ranks on this issue can hardly be overestimated. The results have included the necessity of fighting one of the bloodiest wars in history in order to accomplish what English churchmen did with prayer and argument, a persistent failure to deal with racism since the Civil War, and a retreat from all social applications of the gospel except a few relating to personal morality such as 'temperance.'[4]

I wonder how many of those who argue that the whole of the mission agenda is fulfilled by personal evangelism know that, according to one godly historian at least, the idea emerged to defend slavery!

Another common analysis goes along the lines proposed by Jonathan Wilson.

> As science proved more and more capable of analyzing and controlling parts of the material world and as this analysis and control promised to increase, theology began to lose its control over the plausibility structures of Western society—those ways of thinking and living that are the source of meaning in a particular culture. As science gained plausibility and credibility, theology retreated from the material world and from the doctrine of creation.[5]

I Recovery of Creation Thinking

Whatever the causes of the humanist diversion, there has been a widespread recovery of creation thinking in evangelical theology and biblical studies. Writers such as Colin Gunton, James Houston, Vinoth Ramachandra, Chris Wright, Loren Wilkinson and NT Wright are only a few of those who have contributed to this re-working of perspectives in the last two decades and the pace of study is quickening.[6]

4 Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1979), 376.

5 Jonathan Wilson, Unpublished lecture, Vancouver School of Theology.

6 As I go to press Hilary Marlow's important new book *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) has just come into my hands.

For example, in *Christ and Creation*[7] Gunton looked at Mark's presentation of Jesus Christ at the beginning of his gospel and noted the systematic declaration of his lordship through one episode after another. Disease and politics, religion and the personal life, all are drawn into the realm of Christ's dominion. The series is completed by Mark's account of the stilling of the storm, where the disciples' question, 'Who is this that the wind and the waves obey him?'[8] is answered implicitly by an understanding that Jesus is the Lord of creation. More traditionally we have been interested only in the fate of the disciples in the boat, and not in Jesus' relationship to weather. In the same way we have read the first covenant in Genesis 9 along the lines of the NIV's inserted title, 'God's covenant with Noah', despite the text telling us seven times that this is also a covenant between God and 'every living creature…the earth…all life on the earth'.

Now we come to the essential next challenge. If we have begun to do better justice to both the scriptures and to the world in which we live by realising that indeed God does care eternally for his own creation, we have only recently started to translate that theological realisation into a working missiology,[9] and there are very few signs that the evangelical church world-wide has begun to put that missiology into practice with any confidence or professionalism. Perhaps this is simply a casualty of the noted disconnect between theology and missiology *per se*.[10] ? Are we having difficulty throwing off our habitual anthropocentrism, or more charitably perhaps, is there simply more theoretical work to be done before we are sure that our limited mission resources should be applied to the care of the non-human creation?

Either way, it is my fervent hope that this consultation can be part of an urgent answer to the question. It is always urgent that our lives and work conform to the true character of Jesus Christ our Lord. However, there is a particular urgency to this issue because all over the world the groaning of creation is truly acute, and the poorest human communities are those which are most impacted by the rapid degradation of the biosphere. If we really believe in a Creator God who has compassion on all he has made,[11] why do our mission priorities indicate that we care so little?

7 Colin E Gunton, *Christ and Creation* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1993).

8 Mark 4: 41.

9 Chris Wright, *The Mission of God*, (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006) gives six reasons for the inclusion of environmental work in mission; Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra also argue eloquently in *The Message of Mission* (Nottingham, Inter-Varsity Press, 2003).

10 Paul Hiebert *Missiological Education for a Global Era* (cited in Brian M Howell, 'Globalization, Ethnicity and Cultural Authenticity', *Christian Scholars Review* XXXV:3 Spring 2006, 318) says theological education has created 'a theology divorced from human realities and a missiology that lacks theological foundations'. I would suggest 'creation realities' would be a more accurate and important term although the point is important.

11 Psalm 145:9.

II Creation Care and Christian Thinking

A brief review of how 'environmental issues' or more properly 'creation care' have been placed within the spectrum of Christian views is necessary in order to illuminate a way forward. The following is by no means an exhaustive list but it does show some of the principal approaches that have been advanced in a variety of traditions. For those wishing for a more sociological reading of the current situation, and fewer options, Wardeker and others[12] have identified only three particular streams in their analysis of US Christian attitudes towards climate change. Each would claim to be authentically evangelical but they vary widely and resist synthesis.

The wider range of historic attitudes, together with a semi-serious label for each, looks something like this:

1) Fundamentalist eschatology: We shouldn't care for creation at all. As Henry Ward Beecher wrote about D.L Moody, 'He thinks it is no use to attempt to work for this world. In his opinion it is blasted—a wreck bound to sink—and the only thing that is worth doing is to get as many of the crew off as you can, and let her go.'
2) Instrumentalist: Because society cares about the environment, and it is important to be relevant, Christians should care. John Stott himself pointed out that many people reject the gospel because they believe it is irrelevant, rather than that they think it isn't true. The analysis is entirely fair but should not be used as a justification for a false attempt to make the gospel relevant just so that people will believe it. Nevertheless, Christian environmental concern, and even more shockingly, 'works of mercy' are frequently defended in those terms alone.
3) Pragmatic: Because we cannot evangelise without creating stable prior social conditions, and establishing those depends upon a stable environment, therefore we need to do a minimum of environmental reparation. Put baldly, as social unrest is uncongenial for evangelism, and hungry people can't hear the gospel, we had better do something to improve their lives.
4) Compassionate: We should care because of the poor. This is the approach now being advocated by most of the evangelical relief and development organisations as they now come to terms with the impact of climate change as a major driver of poverty, displacement, and acute social stress.
5) Enlightened self interest: We need to think about environmental sustainability because our own well-being depends upon it. This is the approach of many Christians in the wealthy world, and it is often accompanied by the conviction that their healthy economies will be the solution to relieving poverty worldwide. So it can be seen as going further than a mere concern to protect

12 J.A Wardekker, et al., *Ethics and public perception of climate change: Exploring the Christian voices in the US public debate*. (Global Environmental Change, 2009, <doi:10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2009.07.008>

a privileged lifestyle.

6) Liberal: To care for the earth is an integral part of the calling to be human in God's image, and the emergence of this new humanity will bring hope for creation. The onus is on ethics and human effort, and typically very little of God's perspective, or the possibility of his presence, is invoked.[13]
7) The Cultural Mandate: Because God told Adam to care for the garden, and that command has never been revoked, so we have received this duty as an ethical imperative. Put bluntly, we should care for creation because God has told us to.
8) Reformed: Because Christ is the Lord of Creation so all of life is to be transformed by our relationship with him, including our relationship to the environment.
9) Orthodox: Because our fundamental calling is to worship with all creation, we cannot be indifferent to its well-being.[14]

III Creation Care and Missiology

We might have sympathies with some of the elements in several of these approaches. However, I would argue that entirely adequate justification for considering creation care as a normal element of an authentically biblical mission agenda can be found in either of two well-known missiological frameworks. The first is that which stresses the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, and the second sees mission as the church's proclamation of the Lordship of Christ. Either of these current evangelical missiologies quite naturally provides a foundation for the urgently needed integration of the care of creation into our thinking, and more importantly, gives us a solid basis for action. I take it as a given that both understandings of 'proclamation' see it as necessarily achieved through word and deed. Although that is a moot point for some, the credibility gap that the Christian church in many parts of the world has suffered in consequence of a disparity between its words and its life should give us all pause for thought. Furthermore, we cannot deny the biblical record of how the church witnessed to its Lord, and it should persuade us that words alone will always fail to do justice to a true presentation of either the Kingdom of God, or of Jesus Christ, the saviour and redeemer of the world.

A defence of a disconnected gospel for isolated individuals is even more difficult in times that have brought about a far better understanding of our human connections. Scientific research is constantly identifying new relationships of cause and effect in the biosphere of which we have been unaware. The rapid development of information technology demonstrates the networked ways in which our global culture is now operating as a complex entity. The Trinitarian theology of Jürgen Moltmann, Colin Gunton,

13 See for example the most, and only, 'religious' word in the WCC Ecumenical Water Network newsletter, October 2007—'*inspiring*'.

14 '*O thou who coverest thy high places with the waters, Who settest the sand as a bound to the sea And dost uphold all things:The sun sings your praises, The moon gives you glory, Every creature offers a hymn to thee, His author and creator, for ever*.' From the Lenten Triodon quoted in Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Oxford: A.R. Mowbray, 1979).

James Torrance and many others, has encouraged us to understand better the fundamentally relational nature of created reality. It is very clear that the old isolated individualism of enlightenment humanism had its missiological equivalent in a version of the gospel that was reduced to proclaiming a merely personal salvation without community or environmental consequences. It was a manifestation in the church of what Bill McKibben has identified in post-modern society as 'hyper-individualism'.[15] To state it in environmental terms, the DNA of a consumer and individualistic society has so penetrated our message as to genetically modify it, giving us a GM gospel.

It is even possible to suggest that, in western culture at least, the retreat into the realm of our own personal needs has been a reaction to a realisation of inter-connectedness that has become intolerable: our media make us aware of ever more global needs and tragedies and we cannot cope. Front page reports of scientific studies inform us that the air we breathe has been polluted by factories half way across the world, whose chemical emissions are found in the very tissues of our bodies. We discover that the same trading agreements and agricultural techniques which have brought us unimagined comfort have impoverished whole sub-continents and ruined their earth, air and water. Even western nature enthusiasts find the warblers they love to protect in northern woodlands do not return in spring because of Sahelian drought or disappearing South American forests. Do we care about the environment and so favour bio-fuels? We learn that for the most part they are responsible for deforestation, loss of agricultural land, and soaring food prices for the poor. Such knowledge and complexity is difficult to bear and it is understandable that the western church, and western society itself, retreats to a narrowly personal set of concerns in response.

Yet at the same time, further insights from the fields of anthropology and sociology, allied to the rise of non-western theological leadership over the last century, have brought the global church to a more biblical recognition that if we are saved, we will come to Christ *within* our cultures and that the multi-cultural church arises as cultures are transformed and redeemed according to Kingdom thinking and values. There is no 'Kingdom culture' that can be applied wholesale across the world.[16] So a further blow has been delivered to any idea of personal salvation in isolation from our social context or what Brian Howell argues should be called '*traditions of knowledge*'.[17]

Remembering Psalm 67 with its rolling progression of blessing from the personal to the community, from our culture to our politics, should have kept us better on track. The descrip-

15 Bill McKibben, *Deep Economics*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 95-128.

16 'All churches are culture churches—including our own.' Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis books, 1996), 8.

17 Brian Howell, 'Globalization, Ethnicity and Cultural Authenticity', 320.

tion in 1 Peter 3:9, 10 of the church as a new people being built into a social and cultural reality would have alerted us to the fact that the personal genie would always get out of its box into wider relationships. Since Carl Henry's *Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* in 1947 we have seen a widespread recovery of the true and biblical dimensions of social concern within our missiology. However, we have another clearly biblical step to take as we are confronted by the rapid degradation of our living planet.

IV Reading Scripture in the Light of Creation Care

The Bible is like a seed-bed in arid land whose incredible potential flowers only when the rain arrives. So it is perhaps reasonable that the dormant biblical seeds of creation concern came to fruition only when the growing awareness of ecological crisis in wider society took Christians back to a re-reading of scripture. New circumstances obliged us to re-consider our more familiar interpretations as they always should. When the scandal of slavery dawned on the evangelical conscience two hundred years ago a similar process of re-evaluation took place, and the cycle of ensuing change looks very similar to that which we are now witnessing as we come to terms with climate change in a theological and then missiological context.

So we need to complete our reading of the texts such as Psalm 67 by going beyond their social and political good news of blessing, to the blessing of the harvest and the land itself which ends the psalm. Many of our most cherished passages speak clearly of the participation of the earth itself in God's purposes, but only recently have we seen their prophetic power or relevance. Hosea 4:1-3, written three millenia before the words marine crisis meant much, is one of the most topical and striking.

[1]Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites,
because the LORD has a charge to bring
against you who live in the land:
There is no faithfulness, no love,
no acknowledgment of God in the land.
[2]There is only cursing, lying and murder,
stealing and adultery;
they break all bounds,
and bloodshed follows bloodshed.
[3]Because of this the land mourns
and all who live in it waste away;
the beasts of the field and the birds of the air
and the fish of the sea are dying.

Having done that biblical work, we then need to face the challenge of seeing what these passages mean for the work of global mission.

V Negative Forces

In order to go forward I think we have to acknowledge candidly some of the drivers of our current reluctance to include environmental concern in our understanding of mission. I hope I may be forgiven for simply sharing the impressions I have gained over the last decade on the basis that they have been assembled on five continents and during visits to an average of a dozen coun-

tries, rich and poor, each year. Such travelling has made me aware of the overwhelming presence of a missiology that is exclusively focused on personal salvation, often associated with 'prosperity teaching'. As it is frequently North American in origin, it needs to be acknowledged that the North American church is uniquely suspicious both of science and of environmental alarm calls, for particular reasons linked to its own history.[18]

There is a further brake on environmental mission that also needs to be recognised, and perhaps this paper will lead to further work which could help remove it. Evangelicals continue to express views that differ considerably about how the effects of personal conversion can be expected to bring about a transformation in wider areas of human life. We do believe the experience of the new Christian is sufficiently radical for us to use the term 'born again'. But once born, how much are we going to grow up and change? Conversion of life is not a familiar evangelical concept these days, and our distinctive belief in personal conversion has made some of us wary of expanding the scope of the experience. So it is tempting to question how much change we can expect to bring to the world through our lives and witness. Can we hope for much impact on society, or will Christians simply suffer like everyone else within the structures of an intractably rebellious world? Can cultures be changed or redeemed, or should we simply abandon them, participate as little as we can, and wait for heaven?

At the very least our current situation is paradoxical and somewhat contradictory. Pentecostals and neocharismatics are often accused of having an over-realised eschatology. Their critics charge them with taking promises of transformation that were only intended for the end times, then unreasonably expecting them to be fulfilled here and now. However, as Richard Lovelace has pointed out, all though the history of church revivals there has generally been a corresponding and transformational renewal across the communities where they have taken place.

Even so, while twentieth century Pentecostal revivals clearly led to an extraordinary renewal and growth of the church world-wide, for the most part, they have more notably given rise to personal, rather than social, transformation as a consequence. Nations such as Kenya and Brazil, where there are now millions of believers, remain among the most troubled and corrupt on earth, and are incidentally the locus of some of the planet's most rapid and catastrophic environmental crises. Wonsuk Ma,[19] Rikk Watts, and Tri Robinson are among those from Pentecostal or charismatic traditions who have pointed out that evidence of any environmental concern has been even more absent from their churches than from that of almost any other grouping. Perhaps this is not surprising if even

18 See Peter Harris, *Kingfisher's Fire* (Oxford: Monarch, 2008), 157-169 for a fuller discussion.

19 Wonsuk Ma, *Transformation* 24:3 & 4, (July & October 2007), 222-230.

the eschatological significance of the gospel for the wider creation has been neglected by us all, let alone our consideration of the significance for all people that God determines for them 'the times set for them and the exact places where they should live'.[20] It is easy to forget that time and place are created entities.

We may have varying conclusions about the possibilities for society and the earth which converted people can bring about. However, it is only coherent to answer the question of whether some measure of restoration for the creation itself is a legitimate sign of the coming Kingdom of God in the same terms as we answer questions about human physical healing. Most Christians believe that healing ministry is a normal component of the mission of the God's people on earth. We believe that, whether we think it comes about through medicine practised by compassionate believers, or simply in response to faithful prayer. Most Christians quite naturally understand that it expresses and demonstrates God's saving and redemptive love in Christ.

Biblically and theologically there is every reason for extending our understanding of God's same healing and redemptive intentions to the wider creation. In our own times, when the coming Kingdom has been announced in Jesus but has not yet fully come, it has nevertheless begun to be manifest in a wide variety of ways in the life of his people. So it is yet another sign of Christ's Lordship that creation itself can find a measure of restoration. Similarly the same hope in Jesus that marks the personal and social lives of his people can become visible in their environmental life—in the landscapes they restore, the habitats and species they conserve, the way they care for creation by mitigating and limiting climate change, and thereby remembering the poor. This comes to the church as an authentic mission calling, and expresses the love of Christ in exactly the same way as the preaching of good news of salvation to those who are cut off from God, or the same way as relief of people's physical suffering.

VI Extending Missiologies

So in one sense, although it would represent a major psychological shift for most western Christians to lose the 'people only' habit of mind that many have gained when thinking of mission, no major theological transformation is required. It is more a question of extending our current missiologies to encompass their full biblical scope so we remember the wider creation. After all, the creation sustains us daily and our forgetting that reality is enough of a problem already. So, for the most part, it means changing an anthropocentric mindset that, out of mere habit, stops short of considering creation.

Soon enough it will trickle down into popular Christian culture. Let me give an example of how straightforwardly and naturally it could appear. The singer David Ruis told me that if these ideas had come to him earlier, his song that begins, 'Let your glory fall in this room. Let it go forth from here to the nations'. would have gone, 'Let it go forth from here to all creation'. instead.

20 Acts 17:26.

I suggest that even those who fear we will forego our doctrinal hold on the vital importance of personal salvation have nothing further to lose by such a biblical *demarche*. If that were to be a problem, then it is already out there as a result of the global outpouring of evangelical compassion which has led to the emergence of so many fine ministries all over the world in recent decades. The evidence suggests that there has been no watering down of evangelism or loving witness to Christ in consequence; instead there is a more authentic and powerful expression of what Christian love can mean when action accompanies words. I wish to acknowledge this fear all the same, and stress again that I believe passionately in the possibility of personal salvation.

I also recognise that it is only reasonable to expect the law of unintended consequences to play into the re-forming of the mission agenda as it does into any new situation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointed out that the legacy of Luther was far from what he intended when he launched his reforming manifesto.[21] Chinese Premier Zhuo Enlai was asked about the impact of the French Revolution of 1789 and apparently responded 'It is too early to tell…' I suspect that a missiology that embraces creation rather than ignoring it, that stresses the goodness of God's creative purposes within the context of the fall, rather than believing that the consequences of the fall are so drastic that we should invest nothing here and now, may lead to an unfamiliar set of drawbacks and down-sides. An over-pessimistic detachment from the created world, and a guilty instinct about life's joys are familiar territory for evangelicals. Those we know well enough—a re-kindled enthusiasm for the arts, for food and drink, for beauty and for life itself, we don't.

VII Practical Challenges

So, hopeful that caring for creation will indeed become second nature for evangelicals, and a normal part of our global mission agenda, what practical challenges do we face? The first is lack of resources. Until now Christian funding has not been applied to work which has no apparent human relevance. Therefore, the few Christian initiatives in the field have been heavily dependent for support on donors who merely tolerate rather than enthuse about the belief commitments of the organisations they are supporting.[22] There has been little recognition of the distinctive contribution they can make and little reflection by Christian organisations about exactly how distinctive their approach must be. These are early days.

That leads to the second constraint: a lack of case studies. This is simply an area of work into which we have been

21 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1953) 123: 'One wonders why Luther's action had to be followed by consequences that were the exact opposite of what he intended…'

22 Interestingly the *exception française* makes itself felt here also. While the majority of French philanthropists are Christian believers, they overwhelmingly support charities which are secular in nature. In different ways this is equally problematic.

late arriving, and where often our impact has been limited: the wider church has yet to mainstream these concerns although western society is rapidly doing so, and the environmental movement itself has recognised the major mistake they made in attempting to hold a monopoly on issues that were of concern to everyone.[23] So examples of environmental or conservation initiatives that truly bear the marks of a Christian approach are few and far between. They do exist, but they take some finding.

As the Lausanne Theology working group met in Beirut it was encouraging to have Riad Kassis' case study from A Rocha's work in the Bekaa Valley to illustrate the message of this paper, because this is where the missiological and theological learning needs to be done now. We are knee-deep in Declarations and skin-deep in wisdom and application. It is my hope and plea that as we contribute to the Lausanne process, we will focus on an agenda for action rather than contenting ourselves with adding to the innumerable expressions of well-meaning but ultimately toothless concerns that have emerged over the last quarter century from so many Christian fora.

As this is a consultation paper it is only right that I point out that there is certainly another paradox to be recognised if our goal is to be achieved. Mark Noll has reproached evangelicals for their instinctive pragmatism and lack of 'sober analysis'.[24] It is the genius of evangelicals that their relationship with Christ propels them into urgent action, 'feeding the hungry, living simply, and banning the bomb', as Noll puts it. Yet it can also be our weakness if, as Steve Beck[25] has pointed out in the context of our philanthropy, we need to be soft-hearted and hard headed, whereas the reverse is often true. Just as primary health care and gerontology remain the Cinderella of medical priorities because they are principally focused on preventing suffering rather than relieving it, so environmental work is going to be necessarily upstream. It works at the roots of things, the often complex causes of far later, but entirely foreseeable, human and biological crises. It is much easier to get concerned for starving rural populations than for sudden colony collapse in populations of bees—but probably far more strategic to work on the latter. Such work is sophisticated and its impacts are often seen only long-term. This has little appeal for those who prefer their responses emotionally charged, and will give little satisfaction to the impatient.[26]

Finally, there is a shortage of Christian people with the appropriate technical skills; even those who have them

23 See Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, *The Death of Environmentalism*, (www.thebreakthrough.org/PDF/Death_of_Environmentalism.pdf, 2004).

24 Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004).

25 Steve Beck is former CEO of the Christian philanthropy consultants, Geneva Global.

26 See the late Archbishop Dom Helder Câmara's famous remark: 'When I feed the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why so many people are poor they call me a communist.'

have not normally received much encouragement from their church leadership to consider their work as a ministry, or to reflect biblically on their professional development. Think for a moment of how someone going off to work in Indian villages will be heard by their home church in the west compared to their interest in the work of an entomologist who works in his laboratory up the road on viruses in bees.[27] So many of those with biological interests are challenged early in their studies to take medical rather than environmental courses; it has not helped that the careers that followed from the former are generally far more lucrative than those developed from the latter.

VIII Conclusion

I wish to end by pointing out why the apparently academic nature of some of the arguments above could have very major implications. Perhaps all good theology and missiology are like that. Simply put, we are in front of a global situation that presents as either a huge opportunity or as a seriously scary set of probabilities. If the Christian church world-wide understands that its relationship with God's creation is an integral part of its worship, work and witness, then there will be immediate hope for some of the most environmentally vulnerable and important areas on earth. If, however, we continue to be as damaging a presence as the rest of human society, then, as I will explain more fully below, there is probably little we can do to arrest the rapid degradation that is proving so devastating for them all. This sobering analysis is one that is shared by Christians and others alike—as the Texas philospher Max Oelschlager has said about the eco-crisis: 'The church may be, in fact, our last best chance.'[28]

The earth's treasure of biodiversity—*all* of which has been created by God's wisdom, as Psalm 104 reminds us, is concentrated on around 2 per cent of the planet's surface. Although it has been widely acknowledged for some time that human behaviour and choices are the determining factor for their survival, until recently no-one had mapped who lived in these places—the so-called biodiversity hotspots—and what they believe. When A Rocha completed the mapping it was startling to discover that quite frequently it was evangelical populations who were the most significant. Had we mapped according to even wider denominational criteria the picture would have been even more striking. We have yet to undertake a 'decision makers' map—but when one considers the beliefs of board members who influence the decisions of the multi-nationals that also have a massive impact in such areas, it is easy to imagine that many would be found in church on Sunday also.

27 Another consequence of our neglect of the doctrine of creation is that science itself, just like the arts, remains deeply problematic to the evangelical church in many parts of the world, but particularly North America. See the heartbreaking testimony of the astrophysicist, Joan Centrella, in *Real Scientists, Real Faith* (Oxford: Monarch, 2009).

28 Max Oelshlaeger, *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1994).

Then it is possible to consider the wide areas of the earth that are not hotspots, but which are subject to Christian decision making. If one just takes North America as an example, a high proportion of farmers in Texas are Baptists, and an equally high percentage of those who work the land in Manitoba are Mennonites. I always ask when we meet if they have ever been challenged to think that God is interested in how they farm their land, and not simply in how they treat their workers; so far I have not met one who has been challenged in this way. Unless that changes, we can continue to expect that, for the most part, soil erosion, chemically loaded run-off and the treatment of animals as machines to convert agricultural inputs into money, will continue to be as much of a feature of land farmed by believers in Christ as it of land farmed by those who believe in the primacy of the dollar. Baptist facilities will make an equal contribution to climate change as those owned by the bank down the street. The only difference is that the latter are at least consistent with their values.

Hence the alarm of secular commentators as they observe the indifference of the church to what is happening to our environment—an earth-hostile gospel is going to be literally toxic across large areas of the earth's surface. Hence also the hope that the gospel can bring when it is faithful to the purposes of God for his creation—it can change us so we are people who fulfil God's intentions, to serve the creation 'and take care of it'.[29] If a fully biblical gospel that encompasses the care of creation takes hold of the hearts and minds of the church, it can be lived and proclaimed with integrity in the world.

We are all called to be part of the ministry of Christ's reconciliation of 'all things' to God himself, and we have much to learn as we begin to put that calling into practice. We can be confident, however, that the work we undertake in response to God's call will please our loving Creator, bless the creation, and give true meaning to the message that Jesus is Lord.

29 Genesis 2:15 There has been a lot of discussion of the Hebrew word *'abad* translated by the NIV as 'work'—but suffice it to say it probably goes beyond serving the garden to serving the Creator and worshipping him through that work.